

8 May 1983

U.S. dispute rages over secret wars and presidential powers

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan's supporters depict the United States as a pitiful, helpless giant in Central America, trying to fight communist treachery, as one puts it, "with one hand tied behind its back."

That is what will happen, they say, if Congress cuts off money to support a secret war against the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

To Reagan's opponents the issue in the current congressional debate over Nicaragua is quite different. They ask: "Can — or should — a democratic society try to fight a controversial, covert war?"

In fact, debate has raised unresolved issues about presidential powers and secret wars that have haunted the nation since the tragedy at the Bay of Pigs in Cuba in 1961.

Ray Cline, former head of intelligence for the State Department, argues that Reagan should be able to wage a secret war against the Sandinistas, and many other intelligence specialists agree.

'We have to counter'

"The Soviets and Cubans operate secret wars," Cline said. "We have to be able to counter them at their own game, with the only kinds of methods that will work."

Former CIA Director Stansfield Turner disagrees. It was, he has written, a "mistake" for the CIA to get involved in Nicaragua.

Turner argues that the lessons of modern history, in an age of instant communication, prove that a democratic society cannot engage in covert intelligence operations that might be politically controversial, because they inevitably will be exposed and thus backfire.

Some covert activities might be justified, Turner said, because they would have broad public support if exposed, "but the Nicaragua operation is not one of them."

The congressional debate over covert action in Nicaragua now goes far beyond the question of whether Reagan violated the law by secretly supporting anti-Sandinista guerrillas, the issue initially raised by members of the House Intelligence Committee.

Reagan's policies challenged

Today many in Congress — mostly Democrats but also a few Republicans — are challenging Reagan's hard-line policies in Central America across the board.

They also are questioning his presidential powers and seeking to restrict them.

And they are raising basic questions about covert action by the CIA. Such questions have torn the agency apart with internal power struggles in recent years and threaten to do so again.

Congressional critics say they don't want to rule out covert intelligence activities but would sharply restrict them.

The congressional move to cut off aid to the Nicaraguan rebels has been cast in terms of preventing the Reagan administration from violating the law. Beneath the surface, it has been much more than that.

Intelligence committees disagree

In a party-line vote, the House Intelligence Committee, which is controlled by Democrats, approved a resolution Tuesday "to prohibit United States support for military or paramilitary operations in Nicaragua."

The Senate Intelligence Committee, however, which is controlled by Republicans, voted Friday to permit continuance of covert support for Nicaraguan rebels, at least until the end of September, leaving the ultimate fate of Reagan's covert program up in the air.

As part of a compromise, the committee also demanded a report by the end of September on Reagan's objectives in Central America.

In the House committee, the narrow argument was that Reagan has ignored a congressional mandate of last December forbidding U.S. support for efforts to overthrow the Sandinista government.

However, members of the committee did not discuss their move in terms of legalities. They discussed it in terms of opposition to Reagan's overall Central American policies.

Fundamentally, Democrats in Congress believe Reagan is trying to win militarily in Central America because he sees the struggle primarily in military terms. They are seeking negotiations.

Nor did Reagan cast the argument in legalistic terms in an interview with White House correspondents Wednesday. He pictured the Nicaraguan rebels as "freedom fighters" and argued, essentially, that the United States must support those who oppose dictatorial leftist regimes.

The debate also centers on the issue of whether the president should be free to do what he thinks is necessary if he believes the nation's security is at stake.

The clearest statement of Reagan's attitude on this question came two weeks ago from White House counselor Edwin Meese III, who told reporters:

"It is the responsibility of the president to conduct foreign policy; limitations on that by Congress are improper, as far as I'm concerned."